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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/29/2017
TAGS: [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: SAUDI EDITION AL-HAYAT CROSSES THE LINE, GETS
THREE DAY BAN

Classified By: CDA Michael Gfoeller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: According to KSA's most influential newspaper editor, Turki Al-Sudairi, Al-Hayat has been shut down for three days for implying a connection between respected religious scholars and a Saudi university, and Al-Qaeda Iraq in a Monday, August 27 article. While an unusual shut-down, we are told publishing would resume imminently. Comment: We believe the article, which precipitated the confiscation of 250,000 copies of Al-Hayat from newsstands before they went on sale, was deemed intolerable. The KSA media environment has been relaxing over the past year, but this incident apparently pushed too far, breaking the proverbial camel's back. End comment and summary.

THE SHUT-DOWN: UNUSUAL CONFISCATION

¶2. (C) Al-Sudairi, Editor in Chief of Al-Riyadh newspaper, President of the Saudi Journalists and Gulf Journalists Associations, and royal insider, told Public Affairs officers August 29 that Al-Hayat was shut down because it published misinformation on an Al-Qaeda official (Saudi national Mohammed Subaithi, AKA Abusulaiman Al-Otaibi) and his Saudi ties, implicating Imam Mohammed University and several respected Saudi religious scholars as having ties to terrorism. Al-Sudairi told EmbOffs this was the first shut-down of its kind in his 34 year career. This case, unique because the 250,000 copies of the paper containing the article in question were confiscated from newsstands, and unlike previous production suspensions that were punitive, occurred after offensive materials were published. He alleged other papers had also pushed the Kingdom's limits in the past, but he thought the misinformation, potentially tarnishing reputations of a respected university and religious scholars, exceeded the Kingdom's limits.

A WARNING, AND A DOUBLE MESSAGE

¶3. (C) Al-Sudairi and other contact sources have suggested a growing Information Ministry disapproval of the hard-hitting investigative journalism style by the Saudi-owned daily's reporters helped precipitate the swift action. Contacts suggested that red lines had already been crossed by provocative and critical coverage of local issues which had now accumulated, breaking the proverbial camel's back. Al-Sudairi and other contacts suggested this warning also sends a message to other publications that the Information Ministry is monitoring -- and will enforce -- the pace of media liberalization.

COMMENT

14. (C) Turki Al-Sudairi is the most influential newspaper editor in the Kingdom. We should note that Al-Hayat, as published in the Kingdom, contains Saudi-specific stories not found in Pan-Arab Al-Hayat distributed outside of the Kingdom. We believe the naming of Saudi religious scholars and a Saudi university in the context of Al-Qaeda activity in Iraq, whether accurate or not, was intolerable. We believe this three-day stoppage is a warning sign to the paper to pull back and to others to stay in line. The KSA media environment is relaxing, but at the Government's pace, not Al-Hayat's. We understand the paper will resume publication tomorrow, August 30.

GFOELLER